

# Scholarships

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## Motivation for addressing the problem

First-generation minority college students face a number of challenges that other college students typically do not. For our project we set out to find out exactly what these challenges were and what made them unique to these students. The Youth Build data that we were able to work with prior to working on this project helped to set a solid foundation for our research on these challenges. From the Youth Build data we learned a great deal about minority college students who struggled with a myriad of issues ranging from significant life events to challenges with adapting to college culture.

A literature review on first-generation college students conducted by the Texas Guarantee Student Loan Corporation states:

Research indicates that students whose parents did not attend college are more likely than their non first-generation counterparts to be less academically prepared for college, to have less knowledge of how to apply for college and for financial assistance, and to have more difficulty in acclimating themselves to college once they enroll.

This in essence summarizes the many issues first generation college students have. The YouthBuild data also seemed to support these findings.

## Design Process

### *Collecting Data & Working with Users*

To learn more about the challenges first generation minority students were facing we were able to interview seven first generation college students, six of which were minority students. We conducted interviews with all seven of the interviewees, utilizing a number of different methods including: over the phone interviews, Skype, video chat, as well as in person interviews. We used the hourglass structure outlined in *Observing the User Experience* (Mike Kuniav) by asking general information questions about the interviewee before moving into more specific questions to elicit focused answers. Some of the questions we asked are as follows:

- What do you feel are your biggest challenges and roadblocks about being in school?
- What do you feel were your biggest challenges and roadblocks about applying to school?
- How do you pay for school?
- What are key resources you use every day that relate to school?
- How did you make friends when you first got into school?
- What is your family's attitude towards you being in school?

After we all completed our interviews we came together and Tansy was able to create personas to help us get a clear picture of who our target users were based on the data we had gathered (see Project Deliverable, page 10).

We then tried to identify the common threads between our interviewees and essentially find the biggest and most common problems. Not surprisingly, there were quite a few common challenges, which we had also seen in some of the Youth Build data as well as in the literature reviews we read.

The two most common challenges we identified were: needing help with the entire process of applying to college and paying for school. We came up with a number of design ideas centered around those two main themes, some of them drilled down into aspects of the two issues (e.g. textbook exchange was one of the ideas, which rolls back up to paying for school). After debating and fleshing out some of the ideas, we decided to focus on the issue of paying for school. We knew this was a big enough problem that if we could come up with a viable solution, could have a major impact, even beyond just first generation college students. This was an interesting point because I found myself thinking to myself, if I had had a solution like this when I was in school, my life would have been so much easier. Funding for school and managing expenses is a problem many students experience, one that our entire group dealt with at some point.

We also found significant evidence that this was a real issue beyond the users we interviewed. The Institute for College Access and Success conducted a literature review titled “Paving the Way: How Financial Aid Awareness Affects College Access and Success” that suggested that the timing and substance of the information parents and students receive on college costs and financial aid can significantly impact college-going behavior. One important point they outline was the fact that the Internet is an increasingly important source of financial aid and postsecondary information for students.

### *Working as a group*

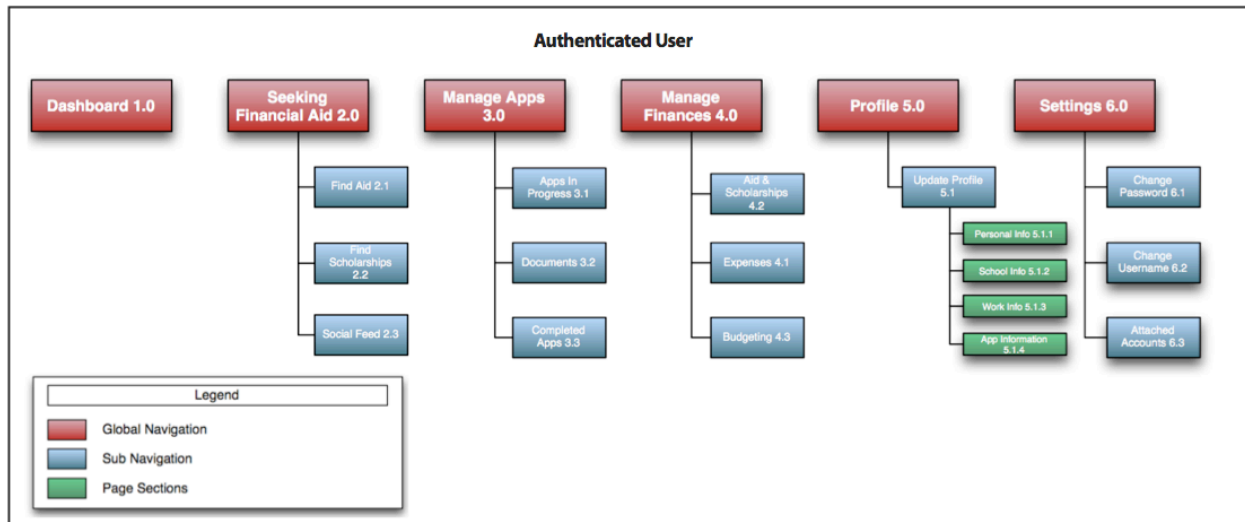
We used a number of methods to work together as a group. Google was somehow at the center of all our collaboration efforts. We constantly used Google Docs to share important documents on user interviews, and user feedback. We also used Dropbox to share wireframes and larger files like the later iterations of wireframes and visual compositions. To save time we most often met virtually, using Google hangouts, which proved to be a great video chatting tool because it allowed us all to see each other at once and switches the focus depending on who is speaking. We also met in person a few times when we could. But we found that working remotely allowed us all to cut down the required travel time and focus more of our time on actually working.

## Proposed Technology

For our solution we tried to think of other tools that already existed that may help students address their financial issues. We were able to think of a number of tools such as Mint.com, FastWeb, FASFA, and Scholarships.com. But what we quickly realized is that none of the sites actually addressed the issue we were trying to solve head-on. Mint.com was great for managing personal finances, while FastWeb and Scholarships.com were great for finding scholarships, and FASFA was a necessary tool for anyone looking for federal loans or grants. Yet there was nothing to connect all these tools. So that's essentially what we wanted to create. A tool that would help first-generation minority students manage their finances and more easily gain access to scholarships and funding for school.

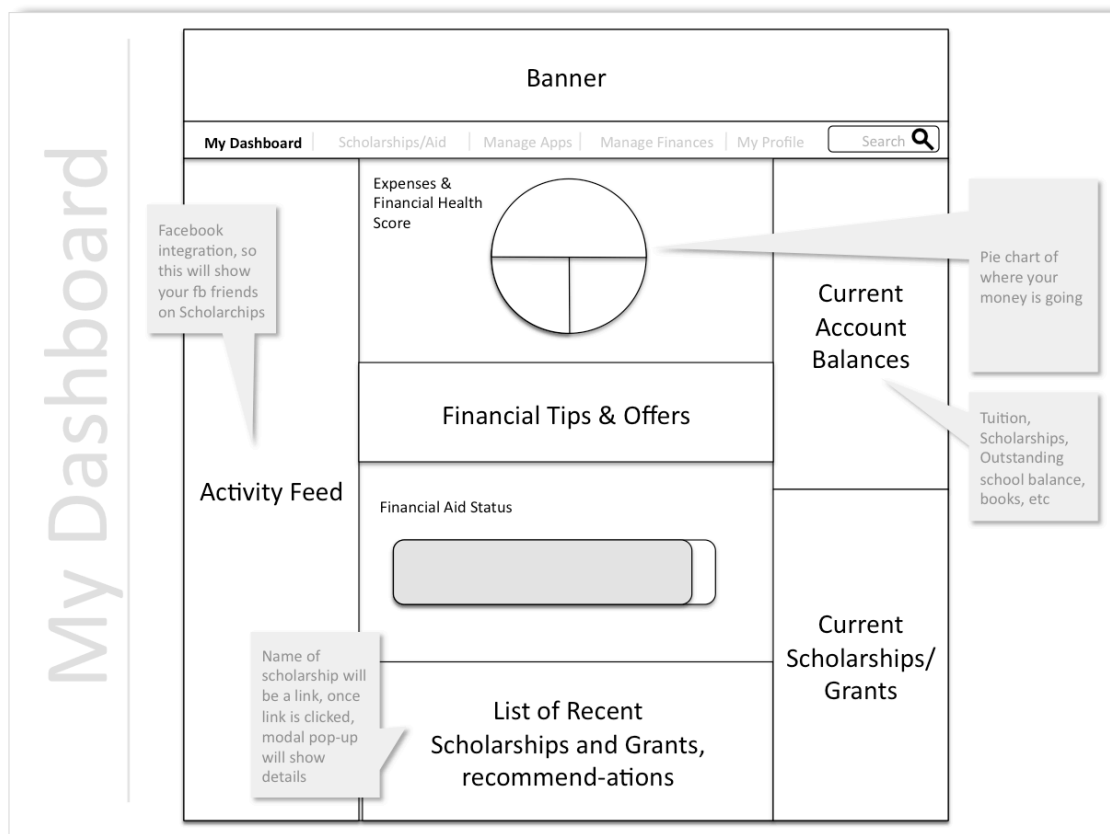
From the very beginning we knew this would be a website, the only question was what would this look like? What would be the main features, what will the site structure look like? To start to try and address that we engaged in a process of collaborative design where we sat in the HCIL and fleshed out our ideas for the interface and features using an over-sized sticky-note board. We ended up listing out a massive feature list with all sorts of functionality, which is not surprising given that we all had so many ideas for what this could be (see Project Deliverable, page 6). We finally settled on a more refined list of features (see Project Deliverable, page 9). Matt was then able to put together a site map:

### Sitemap

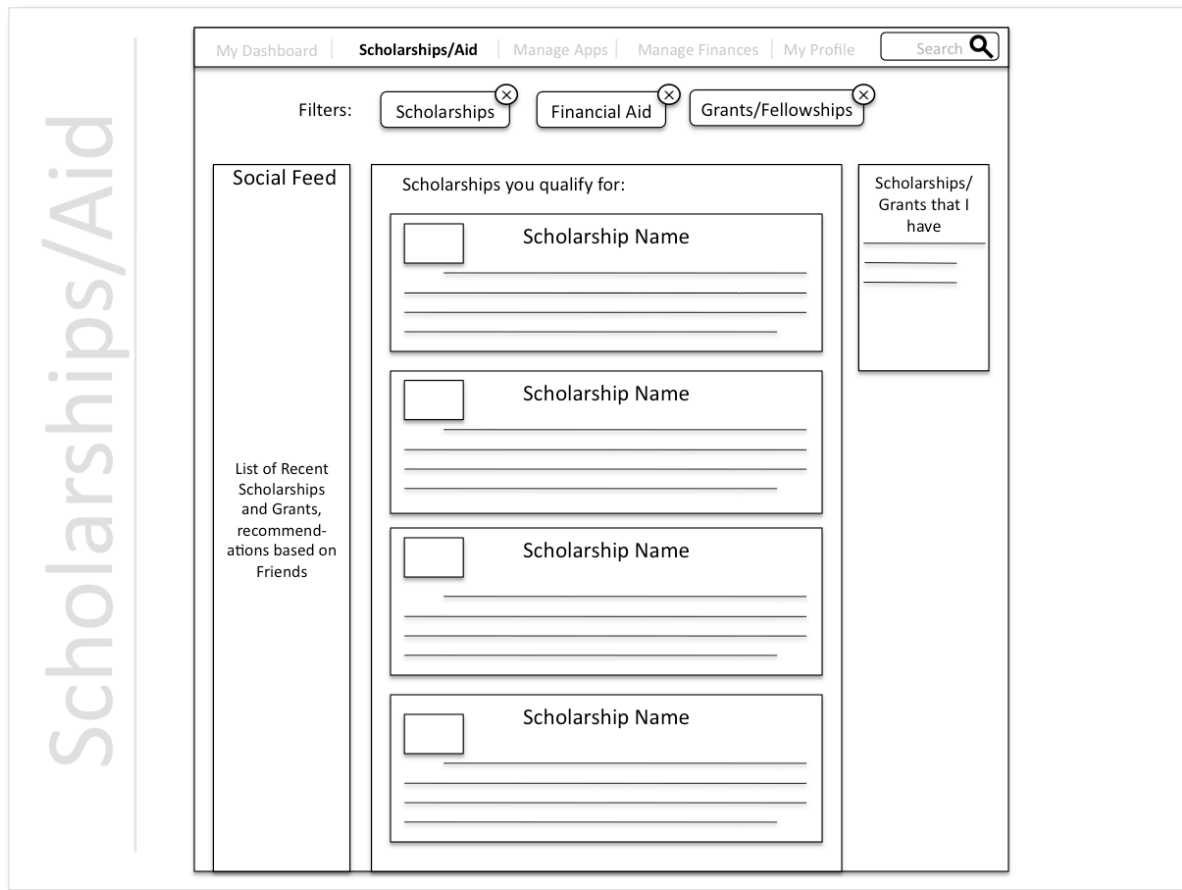


## Wireframes

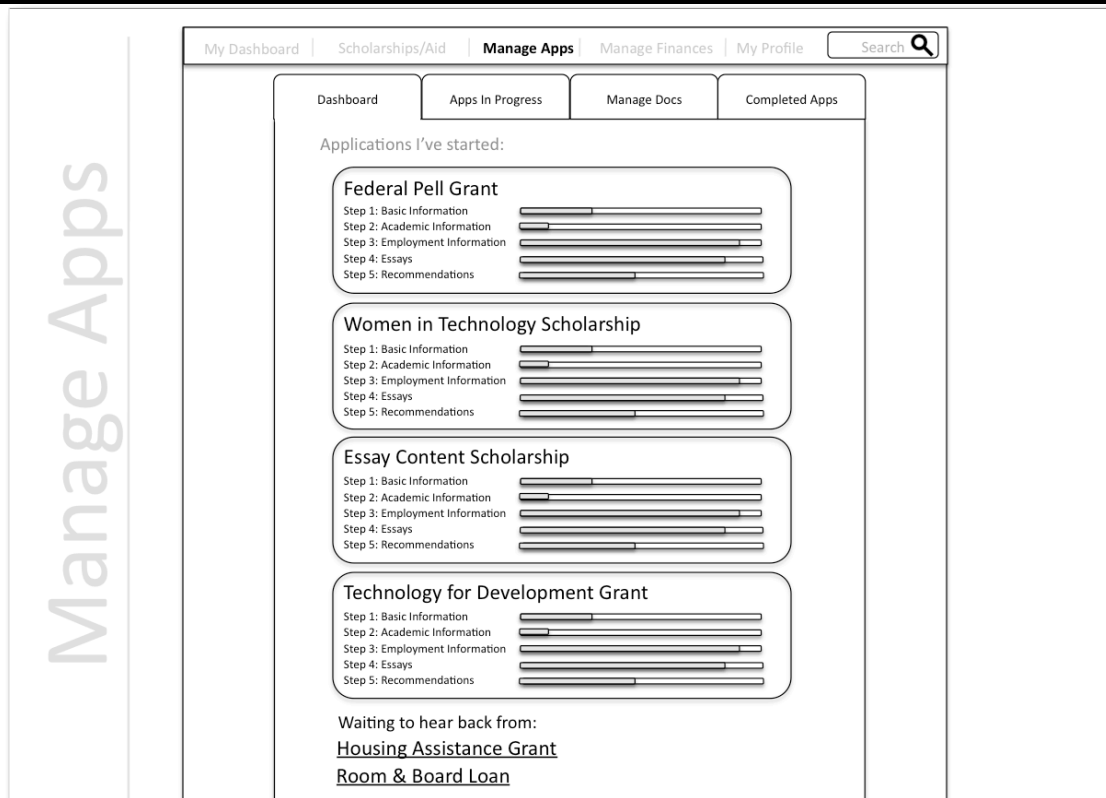
Once we had the sitemap, I was able to put together the first iteration of wireframes. My approach was to keep it simple and not try to squeeze too much onto each page. I used MS PowerPoint to produce them, mainly because it's easier to use for mockups than the others I have tried. Below are the original wireframes for our solution:



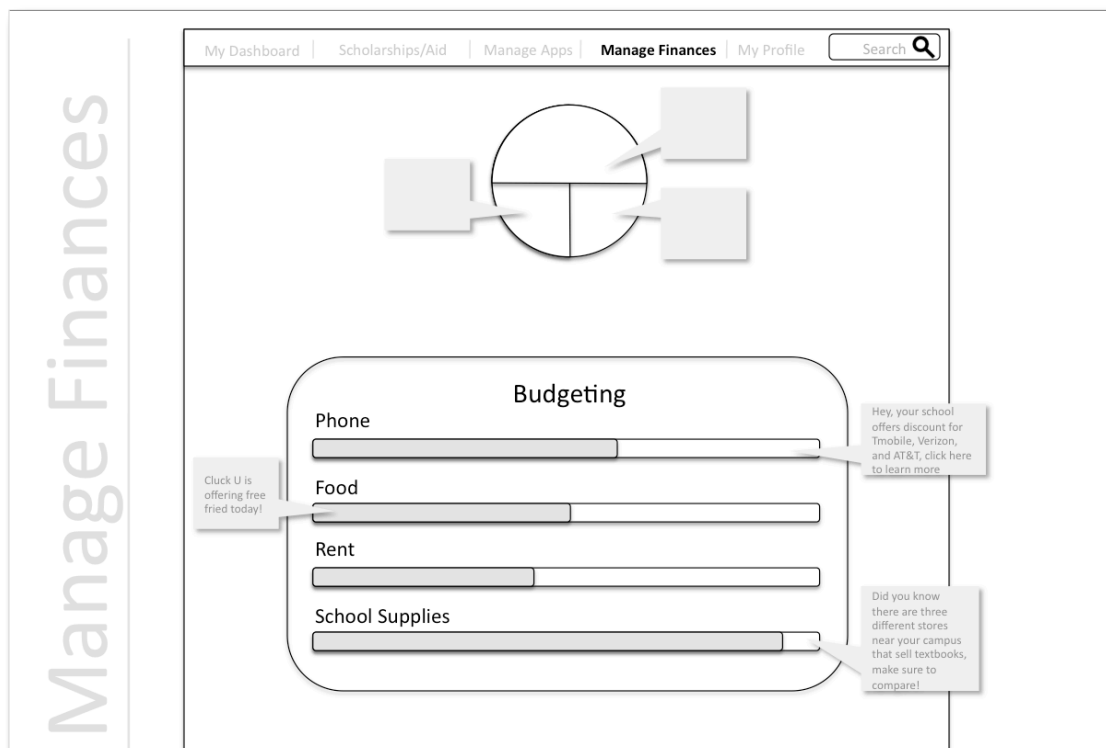
**Figure 1- My Dashboard:** The purpose of this page was to present the user with a lot of information without overwhelming them, a sort of snapshot of all the major areas of the site, but within one screen



**Figure 2- Scholarships/Aid:** The goal here was to highlight the scholarships the user qualifies for to reduce the amount of effort required to find a suitable scholarship. The filters for the search were originally tabs, but we decided that it's better to start with more content and scholarships which you can then refine and filter, than to start off with too little choices.



**Figure 3- Manage Apps:** This page's purpose was to allow the user to quickly see which scholarship applications they have started and their progress for each application, so they can quickly make a decision on which one they should continue working on. Originally we had aggregated the progress indicators into one progress bar, but later decided it was better to give them more details in this view to allow them to make a better decision.





**Figure 4- Manage Finances:** Here we wanted to give the user a snapshot of their current financial situation. The was intended to be a high-level view of what they are currently spending money on (pie graph) and a look at their budget for four main areas of spending and how much of that budget they have already spent for the month. An important component here is the tip dialogue boxes attached to the items, that help the user view ways to cut spending on that item by providing them with actionable information, not simply advice.

My Dashboard | Scholarships/Aid | Manage Apps | Manage Finances | **My Profile** | Search 🔍

**My Profile**

[Settings](#)

**Personal Info**

[Profile Picture Placeholder]

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\_\_\_\_\_  
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**School Info**

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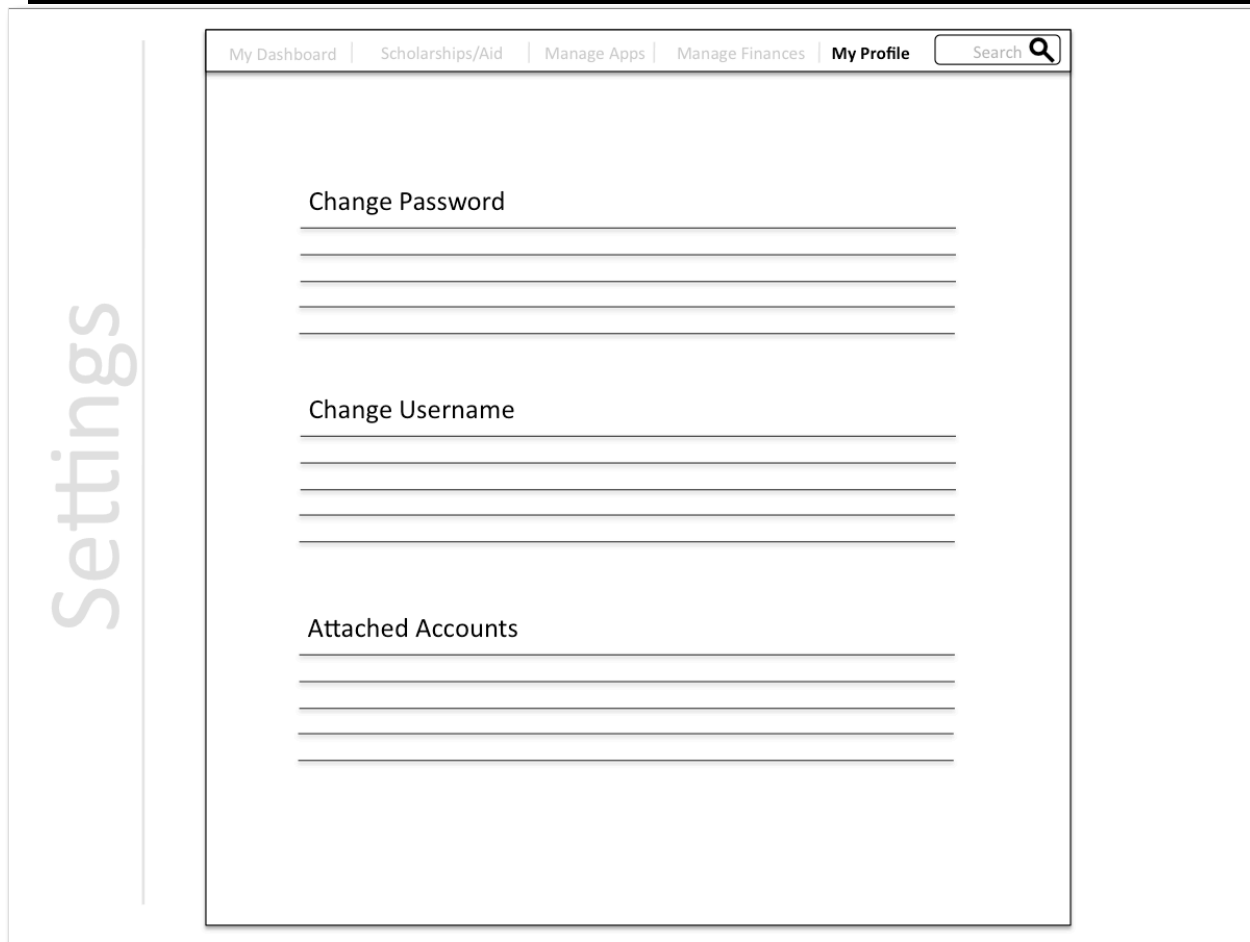
**Work Info**

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**Application Information**

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**Figure 5- My Profile:** This was a very simple page designed to show the user their personal, school, work, and application information in a simple format. The Application Information was intended to include information they would like to include across applications, such as education information, extracurricular, etc.



**Figure 6- Settings:** This was another very simple page designed to show the user their options for their ScholarChips account in a format they are already familiar with on other sites (i.e. Facebook).

The second iteration of wireframes, which were created by Tansy, can be found in our project deliverable and include a different style of wireframes, produced using a tool called Omingraffle that allowed for more detail, I also contributed to these.

### *User Scenarios*

Once we had the wireframes completed we began testing with users to solicit initial feedback. Our user testing was conducted online using the “Wizard of Oz” technique, meaning once a user clicked a portion of the interface we would present a new wireframe screen.

Five tasks were tested over the same seven users as interviewed in the User Research phase. The tasks consisted of:

- Task 1 - Start the Women in Science Essay
- Task 2 - You got your phone bill, figure out how to spend less next month
- Task 3 - Add your work info to the system
- Task 4 - Save your resume in the system
- Task 5 - Find aid to help cover what you're missing from the total cost of attendance

We learned a great deal from this user testing process both about the process itself and our design. In regards to the process, we learned that we need to be a bit more explicit and clear the next time we create tasks for user testing. Many of our users were confused about exactly what they were supposed to be doing. For example, Task 2 instructs the user to figure out how to spend less on their phone bill, but the user had no idea their phone bill was in the system, we assumed they would know this, yet they didn't. One user was drilled into the details a bit too much and wondered whether their phone plan/contract had expired and whether they were eligible to get a new plan. Although this was a level of detail we hadn't prepared for, it was helpful because it gave us an idea of what we would need to do for next steps and to actually implement our design.

Another example is Task 4, which instructs the user to save their resume in the system, however it does not specify whether or not the resume should be saved in a specific application or simply saved as a document to the user's main account. Where the user is uploading their resume determines which part of the interface they click on, so we should have been more explicit. Ultimately though, we were all able to improvise and give the users guidance as necessary.

We also learned a great deal from the users about our design. Many things we thought were intuitive and straightforward were not straightforward for our users. For example, the user I tested with did not know that "Manage Expenses" was where the phone discount offer could be found, they assumed it was some sort of spreadsheet-like tool, something that would just list expenses. Another issue was the use of the phrase "Manage Apps," which the user was confused about; they did not know what it meant. We simply meant to abbreviate "Applications," but that simple abbreviation ended up causing the user to be confused.

We used the feedback we received from the interviews to help inform our later iterations of both the wireframes and the visual design. Laura was able to create the visual designs from the wireframes Tansy and I had created. The user feedback we got on our design was put into Laura's designs from the beginning. But we were also able to make a number of improvements to the visual design after further testing with users.

To address the user issues I described earlier, in the visual design, we changed “Manage Apps” to “Applications & Aid.” We also changed “Manage Expenses” to “Expenses.” There were a number of these types of small changes we made to the interface design that ultimately helped shape the end product.

## **Conclusion & Next Steps**

Many of the users we interviewed mentioned a general lack of knowledge about the school funding process and the funding available to them as students through scholarships, grants, and loans. We also found research that confirms this, so we’re confident that the problem our solution addresses is in fact worth addressing and a real problem.

We set out to find the most common and pressing issues first generation minority college students had. We discovered that access to financial aid and other types of funding was one of the biggest problems, so we designed a system to help students find funding for school and also manage their money. I believe ScholarChips addresses the needs of our target users through its functionality and it’s simple yet intuitive interface and design. Currently, there is no tool that caters to both of these needs, so I truly believe our proposed solution could be extremely useful for students.

The next steps would involve creating another design iteration, focusing on more screens and fleshing out all the possible screens users may encounter. Once that’s complete, depending on how we want to build the solution out (front-end first or back-end first, or both in parallel) we would start translating the visual design into code, starting with HTML/CSS and JavaScript. We would then most likely use PHP for server side coding and SQL for the database. Once the site is up and running we would conduct further user tests, this time with a fully functional online prototype. This would allow us to get very detailed and accurate feedback and incorporate the feedback into our site before launching.

After testing and refining our initial solution we would then release the first iteration of Scholarchips, an alpha version to a small number of users, perhaps about 300-400 students. From there we would continue the entire feedback loop and design iteration process.

If we were to continue with the project, I would continue my role as a user experience designer helping to ensure users have a consistent and enjoyable experience on the

site. This includes testing and constantly speaking to users to get their feedback. I would continue to help with visual design iterations, and I would also help spearhead the business side of ScholarChips, to begin thinking of ways to make the platform sustainable.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect for me is the possibility of truly helping students by providing them with actionable recommendations on how to improve their financial situation. So being able to recommend scholarships, student discounts on cell phone plans, discounts at local restaurants, and discounts on textbooks, is a huge value add for students. So I would naturally want to focus on this aspect as well, since partnerships is closely related to business.

## **Reflections**

This project was valuable for me personally because it allowed me to, for the first time, experience a full design process from end to end. Although we did not get to build and iterate further and improve upon the design, we were able to start from the very beginning, identifying real user needs. I've done quite a bit of non-profit work in the past, so the subject of our research was interesting and exciting, mainly because I did not expect to be working on this type of problem in the HCI program.

Interviewing users, synthesizing a lot of data and proposing a solution, in a fast-paced manner was new to me. All the design work I've done in the past has been on my own time, so it was a new experience to work with a team and try to move quickly while at the same time trying to create something of value for our users.

The most interesting part for me was testing out the wireframes with users. I don't why, but I'm always surprised at the issues users bring to light. I always walk into user tests not expecting users to find many issues, and they almost always surprise me. So getting feedback from users on our design was invaluable.

Another interesting aspect of this was the group dynamic. Because of the limited time we had, we never really took the time to organize all our collaboration tools and come up with a process. So we ended up with multiple versions of files in different emails, sending them back and forth constantly, trying to save some stuff in the cloud, and nothing was really organized until we had to bring it all together. So I think coming up with a process for collaborating and using the tools available will be helpful next time.

Also splitting the work between group members worked well. All four of us had equal input, and everyone made sure they pulled their own weight. Even in the end when we

found ourselves running out of time we all stepped up to help each other out with the different tasks.

Overall, the project felt a bit rushed but was a great experience that allowed me to see many of the theories and design practices we read about, in action.

## References

“Paving the Way: How Financial Aid: Awareness Affects College Access and Success.” [http://projectonstudentdebt.org/fckfiles/Paving\\_the\\_Way.pdf](http://projectonstudentdebt.org/fckfiles/Paving_the_Way.pdf). October 2008. *Institute for College Access and Success*.

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